

Unique partnership provides hope for CA overcrowding

By [Graham Biller](#), Internet Reporter

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"The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering the prisons." -Fyodor Dostoyevsky, [The House of the Dead](#)

In 1965, five years before the onset of the largest prison boom in modern history, civil unrest in burgeoning urban areas prompted President Lyndon Johnson to declare a "war on crime." He created the Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice whose role was to investigate the cause of crime in the United States and issue recommendations for reform. Their official 1967 report, *The Challenge of Crime in a Free Society*, is a thorough dissection of a justice system facing wide-ranging threats, and is the impetus behind the corrections system as it exists today.

In California, that system is rapidly approaching a complete state of disarray. In 1977, ten years after the

Crime Commission's report, there were fewer than 20,000 inmates in California. Today the system is running at more than double capacity. There are currently more than 171,000 inmates in prisons throughout California, 16,000 of which are housed in prison gyms, day rooms, and fenced-in tents throughout the state. The [California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation](#) is almost out of options.

Governor Schwarzenegger has called for an emergency legislative session to address the matter August 7. Critics have called the system an "embarrassment." In a recent interview with the San Francisco Chronicle, Susan Kennedy, the governor's chief of staff, described it as a "powder keg."

The Schwarzenegger administration is expected to request at least \$4 billion to avert what they have called a "public safety emergency." The governor's plan relies on the construction of 25 new "reentry program facilities," focused on rehabilitating inmates nearing release. Obviously, most communities don't want criminal institutions built in their backyards, but when examined in light of an innovative new program at the Folsom Maximum-Security State Prison, Schwarzenegger's plan has the makings of a lasting solution for both the neighborhood and the entire state of California.

Terry Shupe has been at Folsom State Prison for about a year, but he's not an inmate or a corrections officer. He is a union-certified carpentry teacher. In an unprecedented agreement between the Carpenter's Local 46 and the California Prison Industry Authority (PIA), Shupe educates and trains a small handful of the prison's 4,500 offenders in a six-month pre-apprenticeship program. The prison gets new buildings, the Local 46 gets trained laborers, and graduating inmates are guaranteed a high-paying union job upon release.

The pre-apprenticeship program, dubbed "Career Technical Training – Carpentry," consists of a 90-minute class and five to six hours of hands-on training per workday. Sixteen inmates learn everything a union carpenter should: concrete pouring, framing, drywall, taping and texturing, painting, roofing, and finished carpentry skills. But Shupe is fully aware of the world in which his pupils live.

"We're pretty tight on them. This is a job, just like on the outside. If you sit in the corner and let someone else do your work, you're gone."

The beauty of Folsom's pre-apprenticeship program is that everyone benefits from the arrangement, especially those inmates that may never have had an opportunity to make a living wage. That arrangement, however, was not easy to come by.

"The Local 46 had a lot of questions and concerns, but they were really happy that [the inmates] would be working, knowing what it would be like," Shupe elaborates.

Negotiations between the PIA and several local and interstate unions have been going on for more than a year, but with the program's recent successes, more unions are considering the CDCR as a viable means of recruiting skilled, enthusiastic laborers.

"One of our guys has already been released and has already gotten himself a job," he says proudly.

Prison officials nationwide agree that the establishment of a model program couldn't have come at a better time. In early July, Louisiana prison officials urged Governor Schwarzenegger to look elsewhere when he tried to arrange accommodations for several hundred inmates. Official statistics show that by remaining in California, almost 70 percent of those felons will end up back behind bars.

"Most prisoners get \$200 and the state says, 'Have a good life,' but if they have a job they can get a car and a house and support their family," notes Shupe.

Sixty inmates may be a far cry from the 4,500 housed at Folsom State, but it's a start. Creating new incentives for prisoners to stay crime-free after release is one of many necessary elements if Governor Schwarzenegger's community-rooted plan is to succeed, and the prospects appear very promising.

Imagine if other unions, from elevator repairmen to ironworkers, began offering inmates a real opportunity to better themselves in small communities throughout the Golden State. Prisoners would actually be repaying their debt to society in a visible and meaningful way, rather than spending countless hours sitting idle in a cement cell.

The corrections officers that "walk the toughest beat in the state" might find their job a little easier as other organizations help to relieve the system of its least dangerous offenders.

Almost 40 years after the Crime Commission's report, prison overcrowding in California, and throughout much of the U.S. for that matter, has ballooned into a problem that the government is scarcely equipped to address alone. Schwarzenegger's chief of staff admitted that even if the prison construction plan succeeds, "We'll always be over design capacity."

Though Folsom State's "Career Technical Training" is by no means a solution in itself, the theory around which the program is based - that of mutual benefit between the government and a private organization - provides a striking example of hope for the future. "If we get everything going, we want to jump up to 5 teachers and get about 60 inmates," explains Shupe.